

STUDY OF STATEWIDE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: GENERAL SURVEY FINDINGS

A Report Prepared for the
Minnesota Department of Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

in January 1992, the Minnesota Department of Education adopted statewide definitions and entrance criteria for eleven categories of special education. These include: autism; deaf-blindness; emotional or behavioral disorders; hearing impaired; mentally impaired: mild-moderate/moderate-severe; other health impaired; physically impaired; severely multiply impaired; specific learning disability; speech or language impairments; and visually impaired. All school districts in Minnesota are required to follow these standards when making placement decisions.

This study evaluates the impact of these statewide definitions and entrance criteria on special education. It examines the perceptions of professionals in the field (administrators, teachers, and school psychologists, as well as representatives of disability organizations); the number of students identified in the Minnesota Department of Education child count; the use of team override decisions; and the reasons for students being exited from special education programs.

Four methods of data collection were employed: focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and review of existing data. Focus groups were conducted with special education teachers, school psychologists, and special education directors to examine specific concerns regarding the current definitions and criteria. The recommendations that were made by the focus group participants are included in the Focus Group Summary Report, a separate 145-page document (Gritzmacher and Gritzmacher, 1994). Questionnaires were sent to special education directors, special education teachers, and school psychologists throughout the state to identify trends and to determine other concerns pertaining to the current definitions and criteria. Interviews were conducted with personnel from 16 disability organizations having direct contact with or made up of parents of students served in the disability categories under study. Finally, child count figures obtained from the Minnesota Department of Education were analyzed to determine whether the current criteria have had an impact on the number of students being served in special education. In addition, documentation of team override decisions was requested from 25 randomly selected directors of special education to determine the reasons for team overrides.

Examination of the information collected through this study revealed three general findings. First, there was approval of the January 1992 adoption of statewide definitions and criteria for special education. Second, most study participants indicated general satisfaction with each of the current definitions and criteria and participants expressed the hope that no sweeping changes would be forthcoming. Third, this satisfaction aside, there were some concerns raised about particular portions of 9 out of the 11 criteria studied.

Findings by Disability Category

Autism: The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for autism has had an impact on the student population being served under this label. The number of students served has significantly increased. There are no specific concerns with the current definition and criteria for autism, although some sentiment exists that the criteria are not sufficiently inclusive. No specific recommendations are made regarding changes to the current definition and criteria for autism, but it is recommended that a panel of experts be assembled to examine the similarities among neuro-biological disorders and to investigate the efficacy of the creation of a broader category.

Deaf-Blindness: The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for the category deaf-blindness does not appear to have had an impact on the student population being served. There appears to be general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria. No specific recommendations are suggested for amending the current definition and criteria. However, a panel of experts should review the state and federal definitions to determine whether changes should be made. In addition, the method of documenting students who are eligible for services in the category of deaf-blindness should be reviewed to resolve possible discrepancies.

Emotional or Behavioral Disorders: The adoption of the current definition and criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders may have had some impact on the student population being served, but the extent of that impact is unclear. There is relative satisfaction with the current definition and entrance criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders. Despite this degree of satisfaction, however, some individuals believe that the current criteria are ambiguous and too broad and that there appear to be few standards or norms upon which to base eligibility decisions. Based upon the findings of this study, two recommendations are made. First, the criteria should be examined to determine whether they allow for consistent identification of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, or whether they are so ambiguous that they allow inclusion of many students not eligible for special education services in other disability categories. Second, the recommendations made by the focus groups for the category of emotional or behavioral disorders should be examined and implemented, as appropriate.

Hearing Impaired: The adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of hearing impaired seems to have had an impact on the student population being served. Although the number and percentage of students being served has not changed significantly, it appears that students with milder hearing losses are now being served in this category. For the most part, there is general satisfaction with the definition and criteria as they currently exist. However, widespread sentiment exists that the name for this category is inappropriate. There were also some specific concerns and recommendations made by the focus group

for this category. It is recommended that the name for this category be changed to "deaf and hard of hearing." In addition, those specific recommendations made by the focus group for this category should be implemented.

Mentally Impaired: Mild-Moderate/Moderate-Severe: The adoption of the current definition and criteria for the category of mentally impaired seems to have resulted in a decrease in the number of students being served. As a whole, study participants expressed general satisfaction with having statewide definition and criteria for the category of mentally impaired. However, assessment and performance levels of adaptive behavior and the establishment of the 70-1Q cutoff were viewed as being somewhat problematic. It is suggested that those recommendations made by the focus groups for the category of mentally impaired be implemented. These include recommendations regarding the assessment and performance levels of adaptive behavior and the establishment of the 70-IQ cutoff, as well as recommendations for modifications in terminology that will increase the clarity and precision of the definition and criteria.

Other Health Impaired: The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for other health impaired may have had an impact on the student population being served. The extent of that impact is unclear, but the population has increased by 200%. For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated that the current definition and entrance criteria for other health impaired are so broad that they allow many students with minor educational problems to qualify when they do not qualify for services in other disability categories. It is recommended that the criteria be reviewed to determine whether they are sufficiently restrictive to ensure that only students with other health impairments are eligible. It is also recommended that there be a review of the definitions and criteria for other health impaired and physically impaired to ensure that they are distinct categories, and that the relationship of other health impaired to physically impaired and adapted physical education be clarified by the Minnesota Department, of Education.

Physically Impaired: It appears that the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of physically impaired has had no impact on the student population being served. For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria for physically impaired. No changes in the current definition and criteria for the category physically impaired are recommended. However, because the relationship of physically impaired to other health impaired and adapted physical education was viewed as confusing, it is recommended that this relationship be clarified by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Severely Multiply impaired: The information obtained during this study suggested that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for severely multiply impaired has had no impact. There are no concerns about either the definition or criteria for this category; therefore, no recommendations are made.

Specific Learning Disability: The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for specific learning disability has had an impact on the student population being served. Fewer students are being identified exclusively on underachievement, and information processing is playing an increasing, albeit small, role. For the most part, the adoption of a statewide definition and entrance criteria is viewed favorably. However, concerns and confusion do exist regarding some components of that definition and criteria, especially information processing. It is recommended that there should be clarification of the construct of information processing, including the ways and means to best identify and measure it. Second, the recommendations made by the focus groups for specific learning disabilities should be implemented as appropriate.

Speech or Language Impairments: The adoption of the current definition and criteria for speech or language impairments may have had an impact on the student population being served. The students now being served appear to have more severe speech and language problems. There is general satisfaction with much of the current definition and entrance criteria for speech or language impairments. However, three broad concerns were noted: the establishment of the -2.0 standard deviation discrepancy, identification of appropriate assessment instruments, and the transition from early childhood special education to speech or language services in elementary school. Based on the information collected during this study, it is suggested that the recommendations made by the focus group for speech or language services should be implemented.

Visually Impaired: The information obtained during this study indicated that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for visually impaired appears to have had little impact on the student population being served. For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria for visually impaired as they currently exist. However, some relatively minor concerns were noted. Based on the information collected during this study, it is suggested that those recommendations made by the focus group for the category of visually impaired be implemented to increase the clarity and precision of the definition and criteria.

Other Criteria Related Issues

In addition, a number of other significant issues were identified. Because these issues surfaced in various components of the research, because they cut across disability areas, and because they were addressed in the comments of so many of the study's participants, they also warrant discussion. Some of these issues were directly related to the current definitions and criteria, while others were seen as affecting special education in a much broader sense. Issues that were directly related to the definitions and criteria included: assessment; cultural, environmental, and economic influences; exit criteria; "gray area" students; other agents; team override decisions; and the utility of this study. The broader issues included paperwork and service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges facing special education policy makers is the task of defining categories of service and determining entrance criteria for those categories. "How narrow or broad the definition is influences the numbers and types of children needing or receiving services, the types of services provided, and ultimately the cost" of providing those services (Shackelford, 1992). Prior to January 1992, school districts within the state of Minnesota had leeway in determining student eligibility for special education. However, in an effort to provide continuity in identification, the State Board of Education Rules, Chapter 3525.1325-1349, were adopted codifying entrance criteria for eleven categories. Since January 1992, all school districts in Minnesota have been required to follow these criteria when making placement decisions.

Depending on previous district practices, the current definitions and entrance criteria may have had an impact on the number and severity of students served in any one of the eleven disability categories. The statewide criteria may serve to exclude students who might otherwise have been eligible; if this is the case, alternate educational options for those students may need to be identified. The current definitions and entrance criteria may also serve to identify students who were previously ineligible for special education. Because local school districts have used these statewide definitions and entrance criteria since January 1992, district personnel have had the opportunity to become familiar with them in making placement decisions. They have had sufficient time to identify aspects of the entrance criteria that are most workable, as well as to detect areas that may be problematic or in need of revision.

In order to examine the possible impact of the definitions and entrance criteria adopted in 1992, the researchers identified and examined four indicators of change: the perceptions of professionals in the field (administrators, special education teachers, and school psychologists, as well as representatives of disability organizations); the number of students identified in the Minnesota Department of Education child count; the use of team override decisions; and the reasons for students being exited from special education programs. Change in any of these indicators may show what impact the current definitions and entrance criteria have had on the student populations being served.

METHOD

In order to examine the impact that the adoption of the statewide definitions and entrance criteria may have had in eleven disability categories, it was necessary to gather information from multiple sources. These sources included existing data as well as individuals actively involved with students with disabilities. The existing data included Minnesota Department of Education child count figures from the years 1990-91 through 1993-94 and team override documentation from special education records provided by randomly selected directors of special education. School district personnel (special education directors, school psychologists, and special education teachers) and representatives of disability organizations provided information about their experiences with the current statewide definitions and entrance criteria.

For the purposes of this study, four data collection techniques were used by the researchers. First, a series of focus groups directly addressed the current definitions and entrance criteria. Second, two statewide questionnaires emphasized input from school district personnel. Third, reviews of Minnesota Department of Education child count figures and special education team override decisions were conducted. Fourth, interviews were held with several Minnesota disability organizations.

Technique #1: Focus Groups

The primary purpose of the focus groups was to elicit information and comments from school district personnel regarding what revisions, if any, are needed for the definitions and entrance criteria of the disability categories. According to Brodigan (1991),

increasing numbers of researchers are embracing qualitative research, in part because of the demonstrated utility of the focus group interview. . . . The important assumption is that information produced (in a focus group) will be richer, more complete and more revealing than that which can be obtained in, for example, a series of interviews." (page 2)

The design of the focus groups for this study was based upon the market research group procedure. Each session was conducted by an independent consulting firm with expertise in focus group techniques. An independent firm was utilized in order to ensure unbiased and impartial findings.

The beginning of each focus group provided an introduction to and explanation of the session's purpose. This was followed by a group discussion in which participants had the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding necessary revisions to the targeted definition and entrance criteria. The final segment of

each focus group was used to review and confirm the information discussed, and allowed the session leader to address any pertinent issues not previously discussed by the group. Confidentiality for all opinions expressed by school district personnel participating in these focus groups was maintained.

Sixteen (16) focus groups were conducted with special education teachers, special education directors, and school psychologists who were randomly selected from Minnesota Department of Education licensure rosters. Initially, each participant received a letter of invitation to take part in a focus group. Individuals who indicated they would be able to participate then received letters of confirmation and a copy of the updated entrance criteria. In addition, to ensure a high level of participation, postcard reminders were sent. Overall, the rate of participation by professionals agreeing to attend a focus group was 92.7%.

Each focus group made up of teachers was limited to the discussion of only one disability category. The number, duration, and location of the focus groups for teachers were based upon the proportion of students and the number of teachers holding licensure in each of the disability categories. Three focus groups each were conducted with teachers of students with mental impairments, specific learning disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disorders. One focus group was conducted for each of the following populations: speech or language impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, and physical impairments.

To ensure a broad perspective, focus groups were held to elicit comments from school psychologists (one focus group) and special education directors (two focus groups). The school psychologists discussed the entrance criteria for mental impairments, specific learning disabilities, and emotional or behavioral disorders. The two groups of special education directors were organized on the basis of their positions as directors of single districts or of special education cooperatives. Their focus groups discussed criteria they perceived to be problematic.

Identical procedures were followed for conducting all focus groups. When the groups convened, participants received a copy of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category or categories to be evaluated. They were asked to review each section of the criteria and to indicate their concerns and recommendations. These concerns and recommendations were recorded on a flip chart to serve as a visual reminder. Finally, participants were asked to vote on the concerns raised and the recommendations made. All focus group proceedings were recorded on audiotape to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the comments and recommendations made. The results of these focus groups are presented in the Focus Group Summary Report, a separate 145-page document which is available from the Minnesota Department of Education (Gritzmacher and Gritzmacher, 1994).

Technique #2: Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were designed to elicit information from school district personnel regarding special education definitions and entrance criteria, team override decisions, and exit criteria. One questionnaire targeted directors of special education, and the other involved special education teachers and school psychologists. These instruments were constructed by following generally accepted procedures for questionnaire development (Converse, 1986). For both questionnaires, a tentative list of questions was based upon issues for study identified by the Minnesota Department of Education. These questions were incorporated into initial instruments that were reviewed by a panel of experts, which included special education directors, special education teachers, school psychologists, and Minnesota Department of Education staff. Changes to the instruments were based on input from these panel members. Following revisions, the instruments were formatted and field tested using a selected group of special education directors or special education teachers, depending upon the questionnaire target. The results of the field tests were examined and the instruments further modified to ensure ease of completion and accuracy of results.

In order to ensure maximum participation and an optimal return rate, several steps were followed. A personalized explanatory letter accompanied each questionnaire, indicating the purpose of the study and tentative timelines. Ten (10) days after mailing the questionnaire, postcard reminders were sent to all participants, thanking them for their participation and (if needed) encouraging them to complete and return the questionnaire. Approximately three weeks after the initial mailing, a second questionnaire was mailed to all individuals who had not returned a completed form. Upon return, each questionnaire was coded, the results entered into a computer data base, and the data statistically analyzed,

Of those instruments mailed to the 98 directors of special education in Minnesota, 84 were returned (85.7%). The director's questionnaire addressed the following issues:

1. whether changes have occurred in the number of new students identified as being eligible for special education services within each disability category;
2. the rate of team override decisions by disability category;
3. the extent to which decisions made to discontinue services to students are based on the exit criteria in Minnesota State Board of Education Special Education Rules, subpart 3525.1349;
4. whether students who were served in special education programs before the current entrance criteria were adopted in 1992 have been exited from those programs as a direct result of the current entrance criteria; and

5. what, if any, general education options have been developed for students who are no longer eligible for services since the current entrance criteria were adopted.

The second questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 2,190 special education teachers and school psychologists. It requested information specific to the primary disability category with which each recipient worked (one-third of the school psychologists reviewed mental impairments, one-third reviewed specific learning disabilities, and one-third reviewed emotional or behavioral disorders). Of these questionnaires, 1,535 were returned for an overall return rate of 70.1%. A breakdown of the individual groups surveyed is listed below.

Groups Surveyed	Questionnaires Mailed	Questionnaires Returned	Percent Returned
Specific Learning Disability			
teachers	389	272	69.9
psychologists	114	78	68.4
Total SLD	503	350	69.6
Emotional or Behavioral Disorders			
teachers	288	182	63.2
psychologists	115	80	69.6
Total E/BD	403	262	65.0
Mentally Impaired			
mild/moderate teachers	286	188	65.7
moderate/severe teachers	284	195	68.7
psychologists	113	84	74.3
Total MI	683	467	68.4
Speech or Language Impairments--teachers	293	234	79.9
Physically impaired-teachers	74	53	71.6
Hearing impaired-teachers	168	121	72.0
Visually Impaired-teachers	66	48	72.7
Grand Total	2190	1535	70.1

The issues addressed through this questionnaire included:

1. whether changes have occurred in the number of new students identified as being eligible for special education services;
2. whether factors or conditions exist that make it difficult to appropriately apply the current entrance criteria;
3. whether there are differences in population characteristics for students being served under the current entrance criteria;
4. a comparison of the use of team override decisions prior to and following the adoption of the current entrance criteria;
5. the reasons for the infrequent use of team override decisions;

6. whether the current entrance criteria have been used to exit students from special education services;
7. the extent to which decisions made to discontinue services to students are based on the exit criteria in Minnesota State Board of Education Special Education Rules, subpart 3525.1349; and
8. what, if any, general education options have been developed for students who are no longer eligible for services since the current entrance criteria were adopted.

Technique #3: Record Review

The record review was made up of two separate components. The first component was a review of actual special education records containing team override decisions. The second component was a review of Minnesota Department of Education child count figures.

In order to determine the impact of the current definitions and entrance criteria on team override decisions, examples of team override documentation were needed. Therefore, 25 special education directors were randomly selected and asked to submit seven examples of this documentation, one for each of the following categories: specific learning disability, emotional or behavioral disorders, mental impairments, speech or language impairments, physical impairments, hearing impairments, and visual impairments. In the event that there were no team overrides in one or more of these categories, each director was asked to submit a total of seven examples from any of the disability categories noted above. These actual special education records were examined to determine the basis upon which team override decisions were made. (Directors were assured that this information would be used only for summary data, and not for monitoring or compliance purposes.)

Sixteen (16) of the 25 directors responded to the request for documentation of team override information, for a response rate of 64%. Of those directors who responded, two indicated that no team overrides had occurred in their districts since January 1992. The remaining 14 directors provided 61 records for review. The number of records provided by each director ranged from one to seven, with a mean of 4.4.

Of those 61 student records reviewed, 40 were in the category of specific learning disability. Eleven of the records were for speech or language services, and of those, six addressed early childhood special education students while another was written to obtain developmental adapted physical education services. Seven records were provided for the category of mental impairment and three for emotional or behavioral disorders. There were no records submitted for the categories of physical impairment, visual impairment, or hearing impairment.

Student Records Reviewed

<u>Disability Area</u>	<u>Total</u>
Specific Learning Disability	40
Speech or language Impairments	11
Mentally Impaired	7
Emotional or Behavioral Disorders	3
Physically Impaired	0
Visually Impaired	0
Hearing Impaired	0

In addition to a review of team override documentation, Minnesota Department of Education child count figures for the years 1990-91 through 1993-94 were examined. Changes in the number of students receiving special education services in each of eleven disability categories were noted, as were changes in the percentage of students in each of these categories. This information was then compared with questionnaire data addressing local trends pertaining to the identification of new students.

Technique #4: Interviews

As a means of identifying parent perceptions about the current definitions and entrance criteria, personal interviews were conducted with 32 representatives from 16 Minnesota disability organizations. The organizations selected for this component of the study met two specific conditions. First, they were organizations representing one or more of the disability categories included in this study. Second, they had regular and frequent contact with, or membership made up of, parents of school age children with disabilities. By meeting these two conditions their input could convey specific information about parent perceptions regarding one or more of the definitions and entrance criteria targeted in this study. The organizations contacted for this study were:

ARC Minnesota and affiliates;
Autism Society of America;
Children with Attention Deficit Disorders;
Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota;
FIND, Inc.;
Learning Disabilities of Minnesota;
Metropolitan Association for the Hearing Impaired;
Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health;
Minnesota Deaf-Blind Technical Assistance Project;
Minnesota Association of Parents of Visually Impaired;

Minnesota Foundation for Better Hearing and Speech;
National Federation of the Blind of Minnesota, inc.;
PACER Center, Inc.;
Resource Center, inc.;
Tourette Syndrome Association of Minnesota; and
United Cerebral Palsy of Minnesota, Inc.

The interviews were designed to elicit information about the impact of the definitions and entrance criteria for the eleven disability categories. The purpose of the study was explained at the beginning of each interview. Then, organization personnel were asked whether they had received parent feedback on the current definitions and entrance criteria, and if so, they were asked to describe the nature of that feedback. Next, personnel were asked to share their opinions about the current definitions and entrance criteria, based on the feedback they had received. Finally, personnel were given the opportunity to discuss other issues related to special education.

Based upon the responses given by the disability organization representatives, further probing was done. This probing was designed to gain additional insights into the concerns raised. Respondents were also asked to expand upon key points and provide specific examples of concerns. All information was recorded by the interviewers. Although the information collected during these interviews was anecdotal, it was weighted equally with the other data collected during the study, because it provided a comprehensive and broad-based picture of parent reactions to the current definitions and entrance criteria.

RESULTS

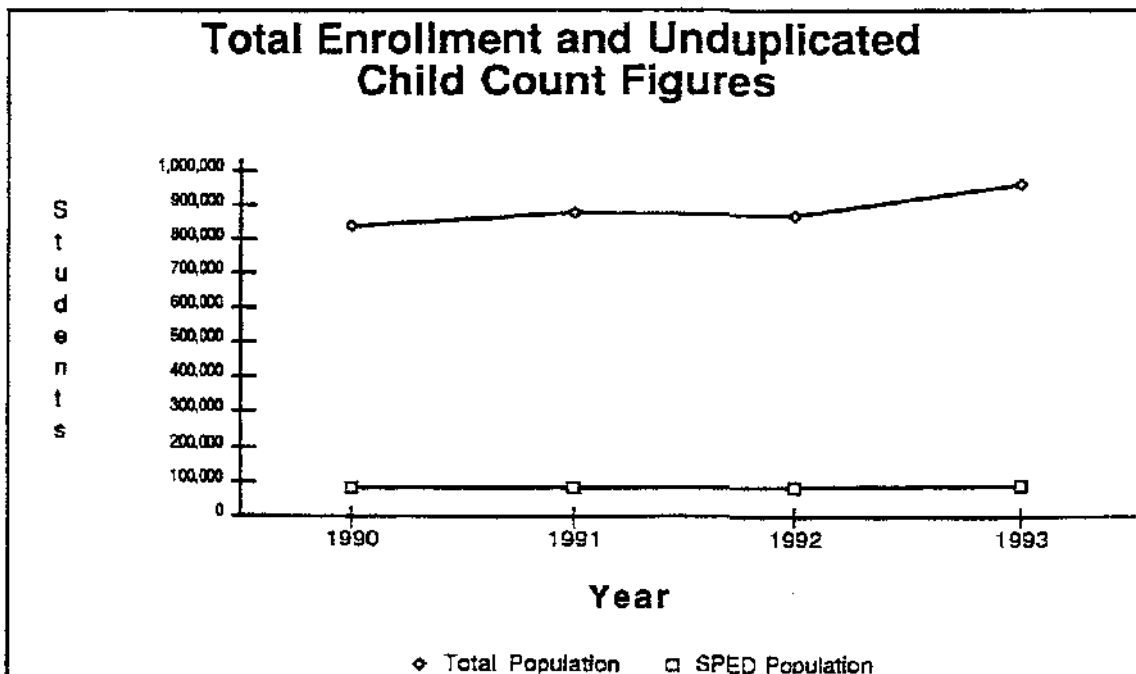
Examination of the information collected through this study revealed three general findings. First, special education teachers, school psychologists, directors of special education, and representatives from disability organizations expressed approval of the January 1992 adoption of statewide definitions and criteria for special education. Second, most study participants indicated general satisfaction with each of the current definitions and criteria and participants expressed the hope that no sweeping changes would be forthcoming. Third, this satisfaction aside, there were some concerns raised about particular portions of 9 out of the 11 criteria studied. Individual findings and recommendations for each of the eleven disability areas are outlined in the following sections.

In addition, a number of other significant issues were identified. Because these issues surfaced frequently in various components of the research, because they cut across disability areas, and because they were addressed in the comments of so many of the study's participants, they also warrant discussion. Some of these issues were directly related to the current definitions and criteria, while others were seen as affecting special education in a much broader sense. Issues that were directly related to the definitions and criteria included: assessment; cultural, environmental, and economic influences; exit criteria; "gray area" students; other agents; team override decisions; and the utility of this study. The broader issues included paperwork and service delivery. These issues are addressed in the final section of this report.

Disability-Specific Recommendations

At present, Minnesota recognizes eleven different disability categories. These include autism, deaf-blindness, emotional or behavioral disorders, hearing impaired, mentally impaired: mild-moderate/moderate-severe, other health impaired, physically impaired, severely multiply impaired, specific learning disability, speech or language impairments, and visually impaired. The information collected about each category is presented separately in the following sections. Each section follows the same order. First, conclusions are drawn about the impact that the establishment of a statewide definition and criteria has had. Second, overall satisfaction with the definition and criteria is discussed. Finally, recommendations regarding changes that should be implemented are presented.

According to MDE unduplicated child count figures, Minnesota's total school enrollment has been increasing. On December 1, 1990, the total enrollment in Minnesota schools was 835,602 with 80,510 students receiving special education services. This represents 9.635% of the total school enrollment. As of December 1, 1993, Minnesota's total school enrollment had increased to 958,558 students. Of these students, 9.447%, or 90,551, received special services. Although the population receiving special services increased by over 10,000, the percentage of students receiving services decreased slightly. Examination of unduplicated child count figures for each of the eleven disability areas provides some additional insight into the impact that the adoption of the current statewide definitions and criteria may have had.



Autism

The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for autism has had an impact on the student population being served under this label. The number of students served has significantly increased.

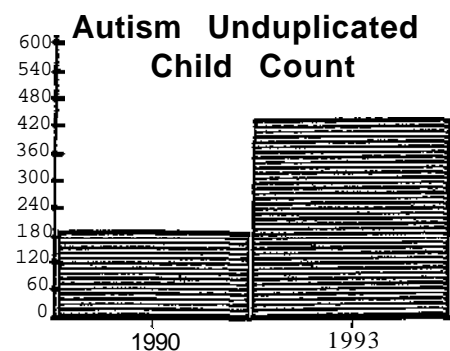
There are no specific concerns with the current definition and criteria for autism, although some sentiment exists that the criteria are not sufficiently inclusive.

No specific recommendations are made regarding changes to the current definition and criteria for autism, but it is recommended that a panel of experts be assembled to examine the similarities among neuro-biological disorders and to investigate the efficacy of the creation of a broader category.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of autism. This investigation addressed incidence rates and perceived parental satisfaction through examination of Minnesota child count figures, a survey of directors of special education, and interviews with representatives of Minnesota disability organizations.

The information obtained during this study suggests that the adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for autism has had an impact on the student population being served under this label. According to Minnesota child count figures for the years 1990-91 through 1993-94, the number of students identified as having autism has increased steadily from 189 to 434. This amounts to an increase of 129%. At the local level, the majority of directors of special education (69.6%) have not seen a change in the numbers of students with autism. Approximately one-fourth (27.9%) noted an increase in the number of students with autism, while the remaining 2.5% noted a decrease. Any changes noted in the number of new students with autism may be the result of the recent creation of the disability category. Presumably, many of these students were previously served under other labels.

Directors of special education indicated that they had no specific concerns with the current definition and criteria for autism. Likewise, representatives from Minnesota disability organizations who commented about this category were comfortable with the definition and criteria for autism, but they suggested that the category is not sufficiently inclusive. Although viewpoints differed, the general sentiment was that other students would benefit if the



category were expanded. One suggestion was to rename the category to include "pervasive developmental disorder" (PDD) because so many similarities exist between autism and PDD. Another suggestion was to rename the category "neuro-biological disorders." In this way, students with Tourette syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), panic and anxiety disorders, bi-polar disorder, and certain other emotional disorders would also be included. The rationale for this proposed change maintains that these neuro-biological disorders all arise from similar activity within the brain. According to one representative of a Minnesota disability organization, there is increasing support for this label. Therefore, while no specific recommendations are made regarding changes to the current definition and criteria for autism, it is recommended that a panel of experts be assembled to examine the similarities among neuro-biological disorders and to investigate the efficacy of the creation of a broader category.

Deaf-Blindness

The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for the category deaf-blindness does not appear to have had an impact on the student population being served.

There appears to be general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria.

No specific recommendations are suggested for amending the current definition and criteria. However, a panel of experts should review the state and federal definitions to determine whether changes should be made, and the method of documenting students who are eligible for services in the category of deaf-blindness should be reviewed.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of deaf-blindness. This investigation addressed incidence rates and perceived parental satisfaction through examination of Minnesota child count figures, a survey of directors of special education, and interviews with representatives from Minnesota disability organizations.

The information obtained during this study suggested that the adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for the category deaf-blindness does not appear to have had an impact on the student population being served. A review of Minnesota child count figures for the years 1990-91 through 1993-94 indicates that there has been no significant change in the number of new students served under this label (from 14 students to 22 students). This was confirmed by 100% of the directors of special education who indicated an opinion. However, an independent child count taken by a disability organization revealed that, statewide, there are currently 242 students who are eligible for services under the label of deaf-blindness. The disparity in numbers appears to be due to the fact that many of these students have primary labels of visually impaired or hearing impaired, and are therefore not identified in the unduplicated child count as deaf-blind. According to Baldwin (1994), a similar disparity exists nationwide.

There appears to be general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria on the part of directors of special education and most representatives from disability organizations. However, two concerns related to the criteria were expressed by a representative from one disability organization. First, the label itself may be somewhat misleading because it evokes an illusion of individuals who have no hearing or vision whatsoever. In fact, most individuals who are eligible for service under this category do possess some degree of either

hearing or vision, or both. Second, Minnesota's definition differs from the federal definition, and this may create a certain amount of confusion.

Because deaf-blindness is a low incidence disability, and because few sources were identified from which to draw, limited information was available. No specific recommendations are suggested for modifying the current definition and criteria. However, two general recommendations are made. First, it is recommended that a panel of experts be assembled to review the state and federal definitions and criteria for consistency, and to determine whether any changes should be made. Second, it is recommended that the method of documenting students who are eligible for services in the category of deaf-blindness be reviewed to resolve an apparent discrepancy, and that the method be revised as necessary.

Emotional or Behavioral Disorders

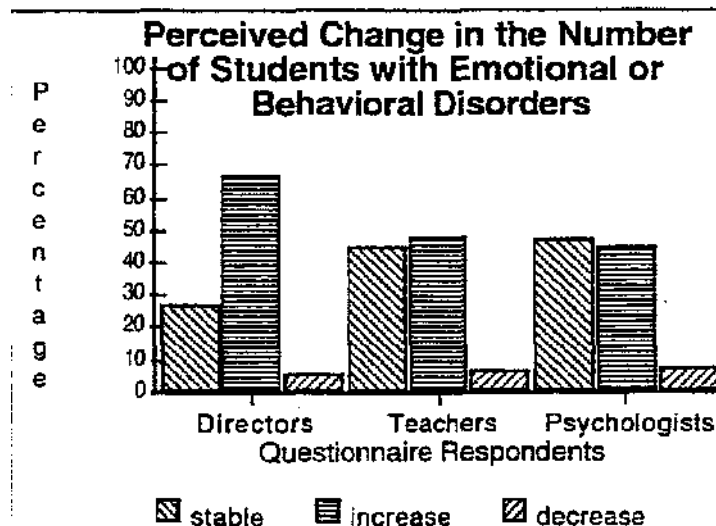
The adoption of the current definition and criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders may have had some impact on the student population being served, but the extent of that impact is unclear.

There is relative satisfaction with the current definition and entrance criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders. Despite this degree of satisfaction, however, some individuals believe that the current criteria are ambiguous and too broad and that there appear to be few standards or norms upon which to base eligibility decisions.

Based upon the findings of this study, two recommendations are made. First, the criteria should be examined to determine whether they allow for consistent identification of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, or whether they are so ambiguous that they allow inclusion of many students not eligible for special education services in other disability categories. Second, the recommendations made by the focus groups for the category of emotional or behavioral disorders should be examined and implemented, as appropriate.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of emotional or behavioral disorders. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

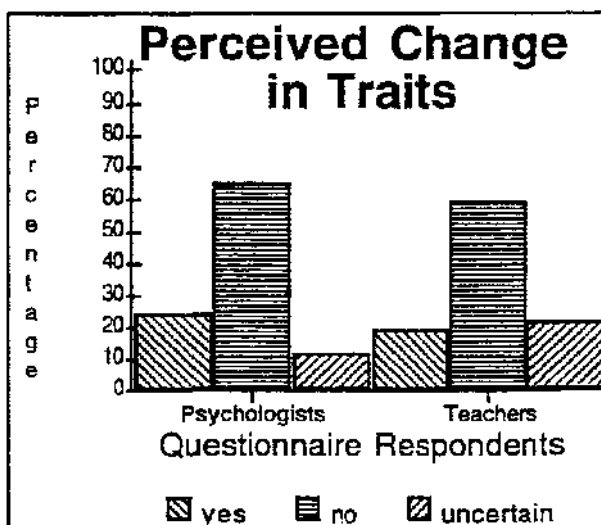
The information obtained during this study suggests that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders may have had some impact on the student population being served, but the extent of that impact is unclear. An examination of Minnesota child count figures from the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicates that there has been an increase in both the number (from 12,246 to 15,259) and relative percentage (from 1.466% to 1.592%) of school-age students with emotional or behavioral disorders.



Questionnaire data for this study suggested that this increase was noted by many special education directors (67.0%), school psychologists (44.8%), and teachers (48.4%). Most of the remaining questionnaire respondents viewed the number of new students being identified as stable (27.1%, 47.8%, and 44.7%, respectively). Comments suggested that the increase was not primarily the result of the adoption of the current criteria, but rather that a growing number of students are exhibiting serious emotional and behavioral problems.

Among the teachers and school psychologists who indicated their opinions, two-thirds indicated there are no factors or conditions that make the current criteria difficult to apply, while one-third indicated that such factors do exist. Examination of comments by both groups indicated that many questionnaire respondents felt that parts of the criteria are ambiguous. They do allow for identification of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, but may also permit inaccurate identification of students who do not qualify for services in other disability categories, or who demonstrate less serious emotional or behavioral characteristics, but who also have a need for educational services beyond the scope of the regular classroom.

A majority (60.6%) of the teachers and school psychologists who responded to the questionnaire indicated that students with emotional or behavioral disorders who are currently being identified have the same characteristics or traits as those students who were identified prior to adoption of the current criteria. One-fifth (20.8%) of the teachers and school psychologists noted differences, while the remaining 18.6% were uncertain. Comments from respondents who believed that characteristics have changed suggested that increasingly, over the last several years, a greater number of students being identified present more severe problems. These problems are not limited to any one specific type, but cover mental health problems including depression and mental illness, psychological problems such as conduct disorders and character disorders, chemical dependency, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), truancy, and more disruptive, aggressive, and criminal behaviors, such as delinquency and violence. Again, these traits or characteristics are not viewed as being the result of the criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders, but rather as having grown out of other factors.



The vast majority of teachers and school psychologists who indicated an opinion (94.5%) said that they have not exited students from their programs

because of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders. The most frequent reasons given for students being exited from programs were that either they demonstrated the ability to succeed without special education or they graduated. Among the remaining respondents who indicated that they had exited students, three primary reasons were given, including moving students to another more appropriate category, inappropriate initial placement, and lack of educational need.

For the most part, the information obtained from focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and disability organization representatives suggests that there is relative satisfaction with the current statewide definition and entrance criteria for emotional or behavioral disorders. Despite this degree of satisfaction, however, some individuals believe that the current criteria are ambiguous and too broad; there appear to be few standards or norms upon which to base eligibility decisions. Because of this, emotional or behavioral disorders may be viewed as a possible placement option for students who are unable to qualify for other categories of special education but who are seen as having needs that are beyond the scope of the regular classroom.

Based on questionnaire information and interviews with representatives of disability organizations, the use of team override decisions in the category of emotional or behavioral disorders appears to be rare. Teachers and school psychologists indicated that they are never used (35.2%) or infrequently used (63.6%), while most directors (94.2%) found team overrides being used in fewer than 2% of the cases. Questionnaire information suggested that this situation exists because few students have needed placement based on team overrides (68.3%). Instead, comments from questionnaire respondents suggested that because the current criteria are ambiguous, it is not difficult to qualify students for services. A request for documentation of team override decisions from 25 randomly selected directors of special education yielded only three for the category of emotional or behavioral disorders. Review of those overrides revealed no consistent reason for their use.

There were several related concerns noted in the comments made by focus group participants, representatives of disability organizations, and questionnaire respondents. These involved service delivery issues for students with ADHD; the excessive amount of paperwork required, including behavior-intervention plans; and the placement of severely withdrawn students with violent or acting-out students. These concerns and their respective recommendations may be viewed by referring to the Focus Group Summary Report.

Based upon the findings of this study two recommendations are made. First, the criteria should be examined to determine whether they allow for consistent identification of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, or whether they

are so ambiguous that they allow inclusion of many students not eligible for special education services in other disability categories. Second, the recommendations made by the focus groups for the category of emotional or behavioral disorders should be examined and implemented as appropriate.

Hearing Impaired

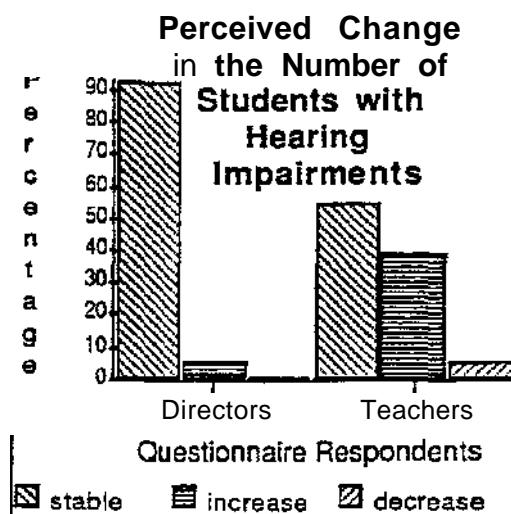
The adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of hearing impaired seems to have had an impact on the student population being served. Although the number and percentage of students being served has not changed significantly, it appears that students with milder hearing losses are now being served in this category.

For the most part, there is general satisfaction with the definition and criteria as they currently exist. However, widespread sentiment exists that the name for this category is inappropriate. In addition, there were some specific concerns and recommendations made by the focus group for this category.

It is recommended that the name for this category be changed to "deaf and hard of hearing." In addition, those specific recommendations made by the focus group for this category should be implemented.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of hearing impaired. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

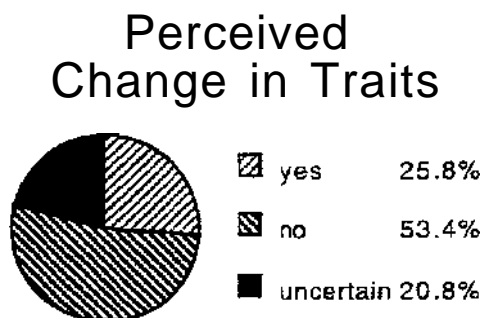
Based on the information collected during this study, it appears that the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of hearing impaired has had an impact on the student population being served; however, the number and relative percentage of students being served has not changed significantly. An examination of Minnesota child count figures from the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicates that the percentage of students with hearing impairments has decreased slightly, from .170% to .168%; however, the total number of those students has increased by nearly two hundred (1,417 to 1,606). Of those individuals who indicated an opinion, the vast majority (92.7%) of the directors of special education and 54.9% of the teachers indicated that they had seen no change in the number of new students being identified with hearing impairments. However, 6.1% of the directors and 39.6%



of the teachers noted an increase, compared to only 1.2% and 5.5%, respectively, who observed a decrease.

Of those teachers who indicated an opinion, 90.2% noted that students have not been exited from their programs because of the changes in the definition and entrance criteria. Rather, the most frequently given reason for exits was student graduation. However, 9.8% of teachers said that students had been exited because of the current criteria. The reasons for these exits were: consistent student use of amplification devices, satisfactory academic achievement, and fewer than three cases of recurring otitis media per year. Both questionnaire respondents and focus group participants expressed concern that students exited for the latter reason were entering a "gray area" where service and support options for their educational needs were not viewed as being sufficient.

While 53.3% of teachers surveyed indicated that they had not noted a change in the traits or characteristics of students being identified, 25.8% indicated that there were changes, and 20.8% were uncertain. The most frequent comments suggested that students were now being identified who had milder hearing problems resulting from otitis media and unilateral hearing loss. These students were perceived as having fewer needs in the areas of speech development and communication, but with needs similar to those students with more profound hearing loss in the areas of language, vocabulary, and reading. The identification of these students was viewed favorably by most teachers. In addition, questionnaire respondents indicated that they had seen an increase in students with multiple disabilities and students with behavioral problems.



For the most part, the focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and representatives from disability organizations all indicated general satisfaction with the definition and criteria as they currently exist. However, teachers, both those in the focus group and those who responded to the questionnaire, suggested including a reference to "general knowledge" in the area of achievement deficit, because knowledge acquired through auditory receptive language is not addressed in this area. Focus group participants also identified several lesser concerns specifically addressing the current language of the definition and criteria, as well as a related concern about those students who suffer from language delays because both of their parents are deaf. These concerns and their respective recommendations may be reviewed by referring to the Focus Group Summary Report.

An issue that surfaced repeatedly was that the term "hearing impairment" is inappropriate and should be replaced by the terms "deaf and hard of hearing." This sentiment was voiced emphatically by representatives of disability organizations, focus group participants, and in the comments of teachers who responded to the questionnaire.

Examination of questionnaire data suggested that the majority of teachers who indicated their opinions (67.7%) found no factors or conditions that make the current criteria difficult to apply. The most frequent comments provided by the remaining 32.3% of the teachers suggested that any difficulties they have experienced with applying the current criteria are related to assessment. These issues included teacher confusion pertaining to administration and interpretation of assessment instruments, the overlap of language characteristics shared by hearing impaired and learning disabled students, and difficulty in obtaining audiograms for students with chronic otitis media.

All directors of special education (100%) and nearly all teachers (95.4%) indicated that team override decisions are never, or infrequently, used for students with hearing impairments. The explanation provided by 72.6% of the teachers was that few students have needed placement based on team overrides. The remaining 23.4% indicated numerous reasons for not using team overrides. In fact, 92.9% of the teachers indicated that the use of team overrides has remained the same or decreased since the adoption of the current definition and criteria. Support for these views was noted during the review of override documentation. A request for override documentation from 25 randomly selected directors of special education failed to yield any team override decisions for the category of hearing impaired.

Based on the information obtained during this study, two recommendations are made. First, it is recommended that the name for this category be changed to "deaf and hard of hearing." Second, those specific recommendations made by the focus group for this category should be implemented.

Mentally Impaired

The adoption of the current definition and criteria for the category of mentally impaired seems to have resulted in a decrease in the number of students being served.

As a whole, study participants expressed general satisfaction with having statewide definition and criteria for the category of mentally impaired. However, assessment and performance levels of adaptive behavior and the establishment of the 70-IQ cutoff were viewed as being somewhat problematic.

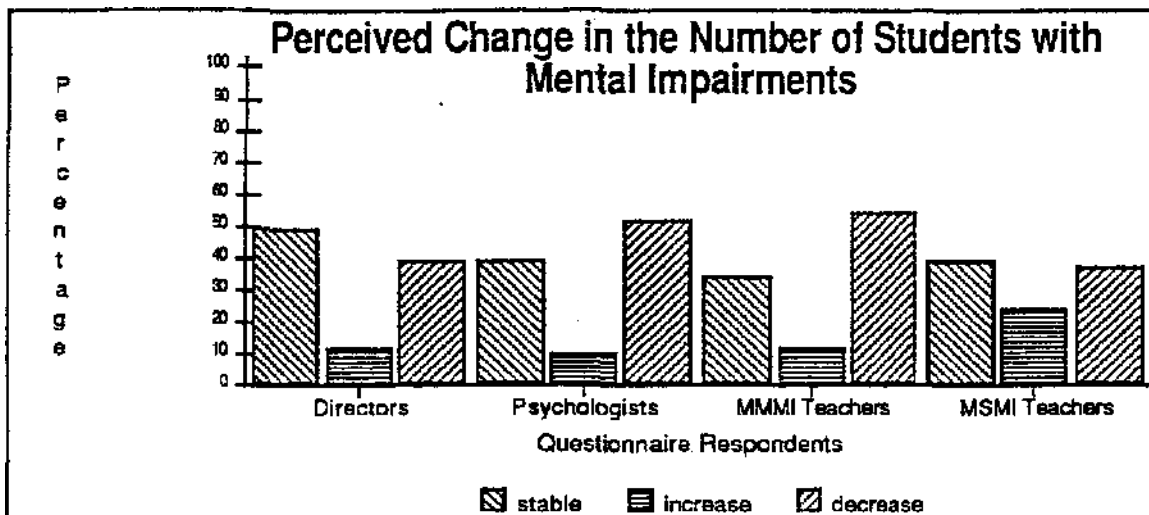
It is suggested that those recommendations made by the focus groups for the category of mentally impaired be implemented. These include recommendations regarding the assessment and performance levels of adaptive behavior and the establishment of the 70-IQ cutoff, as well as recommendations for modifications in terminology that will increase the clarity and precision of the definition and criteria.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of mentally impaired. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

The information obtained during this study indicated that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for the category of mentally impaired seems to have had an impact on the student population being served. It appears that there has been a decrease in the number of students being served because of the establishment of specific performance levels for adaptive behavior and IQ.

An examination of Minnesota child count figures for the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicated a continual decrease in the relative percentage of students receiving services for both mild/moderate and moderate/severe mental impairments (.827% to .759% and .356% to .273%, respectively). This decrease was noted by representatives from disability organizations and a significant number of questionnaire respondents. Of those questionnaire respondents who indicated their opinions, 53.7% of teachers of students with mild/moderate impairments, 37.4% of teachers of students with moderate/severe impairments, 51.4% of the school psychologists, and 39.3% of the directors of special education noted a decrease in new students eligible for services. Most of the

remaining respondents (34.3%, 38.9%, 38.6%, and 48.8%, respectively) viewed the number of new students receiving services as being stable.

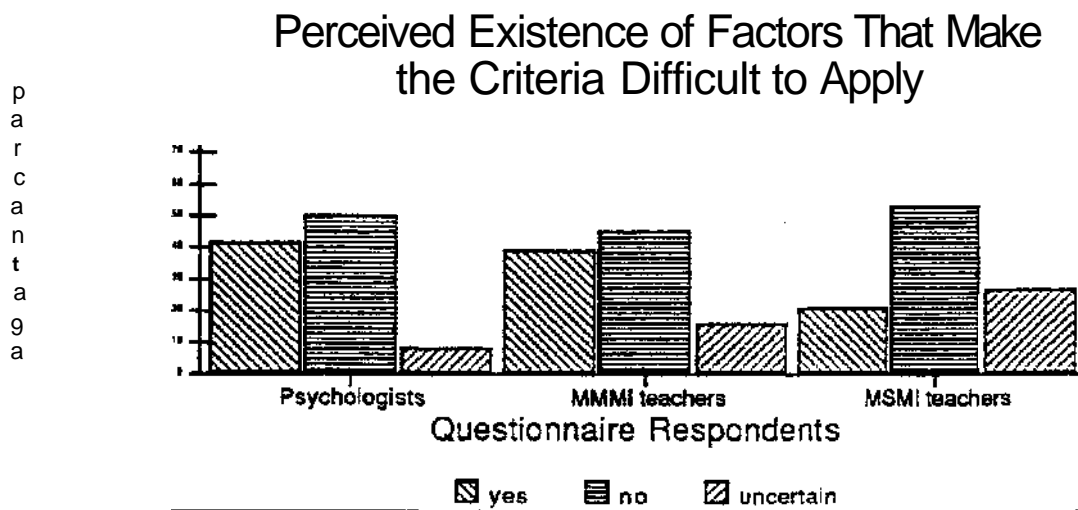


Although 60.2% of teachers and school psychologists responding to the questionnaire indicated there are no differences in the traits or characteristics of new students eligible for mental impairment services, 26.1% suggested that there are differences, while 13.7% were uncertain. A review of comments suggested that the differences noted did not refer to characteristics or traits, but rather to levels of severity. It appears that because of the criteria for adaptive behavior and the establishment of specific IQ performance levels, students served in programs for mild/moderate and moderate/severe impairments have lower levels of functioning than previously. These changes were viewed with concern by questionnaire respondents, focus group participants, and disability organizations. The disability organizations also indicated that there have been more requests for advocacy services for students who do not meet the current criteria for mild/moderate mentally impaired, in many cases, attempts have been made to qualify these students for other special education services, i.e., other health impaired, emotional or behavioral disorders, specific learning disability, and speech or language impaired.

In addition, it appears that some students have been exited from programs because they do not meet the current criteria. Of those teachers and school psychologists who indicated their opinions, 77.9% said that students have not been exited from mental impairment programs because of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria. Rather, most students are exited because they graduate or exceed age 21. However, a substantial number (22.1%) did feel that students were being exited because of the current criteria. The most frequently cited reasons were establishment of the 70-IQ cutoff and failure to meet the adaptive behavior criteria in all four domains. Many practitioners expressed the concern that these students will not be able to demonstrate success without the benefit of special education.

As a whole, study participants expressed general satisfaction with having statewide definition and criteria for the category of mentally impaired. However, two components of the criteria may be viewed as being somewhat problematic. The focus group participants and questionnaire respondents expressed concerns about issues of adaptive behavior. In addition, focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and representatives from disability organizations all voiced concern about the "gray area" that was created with establishment of the 70-IQ cutoff.

Of those questionnaire respondents who indicated their opinions, over one-third of the teachers of students with mild/moderate impairments (39.0%) and school psychologists (41.7%) indicated that there are factors in the current criteria that make them difficult to apply. This was also the view of 20.6% of teachers of students with moderate/severe impairments. Concerns expressed by all three questionnaire groups addressed adaptive behavior. Most comments related to difficulty experienced with application of the four adaptive behavior domains. This difficulty arises because the four domains do not correlate with any existing nationally normed assessment instruments. Focus group participants also viewed as difficult the assessment of the domains of adaptive functioning through the use of either formal or informal techniques. In addition, there were several lesser concerns raised by the focus groups for the category of mentally impaired. These concerns and their respective recommendations addressed perceived ambiguities in terminology within the criteria and the identification of minority students. They may be reviewed by referring to the [Focus Group Summary Report](#).



Based on questionnaire information and interviews with disability organization representatives, the use of team override decisions in the category of mentally impaired appeared to be rare. Teachers and school psychologists indicated that they never (22.4%) or infrequently (73.8%) use team overrides, while most

directors (95.2%) found that team overrides were used in fewer than 2% of all cases. Questionnaire data suggested two primary reasons for this lack of use. First, few students have needed placement based on team overrides (54.1%), and second, there were concerns about being monitored by Minnesota Department of Education (20.6%). Only 6.7% of teachers and school psychologists indicated that team overrides are used more frequently now than before. A review of randomly selected overrides for mental impairment services indicated that most were implemented because students narrowly missed eligibility for services based on the current criteria. Team members involved in those overrides believed that the students demonstrated characteristics indicative of a mental impairment, and therefore were eligible for services.

Based upon the information collected during this study, one general recommendation is made. It is suggested that those recommendations made by the focus groups for the category of mentally impaired be reviewed and implemented as appropriate. These include recommendations regarding the assessment and performance levels of adaptive behavior and the establishment of the 70-IQ cutoff, as well as recommendations for modifications in terminology that will increase the clarity and precision of the definition and criteria.

Other Health Impaired

The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for other health impaired may have had an impact on the student population being served. The extent of that impact is unclear, but the population has increased by 200%.

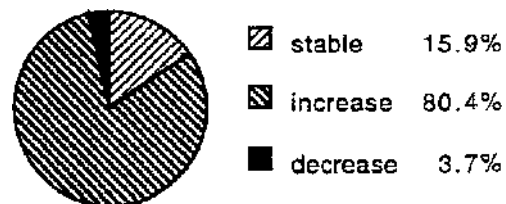
For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated that the current definition and entrance criteria for other health impaired are so broad that they allow many students with minor educational problems to qualify when they do not qualify for services in other disability categories.

It is recommended that the criteria be reviewed to determine whether they are sufficiently restrictive to ensure that only students with other health impairments are eligible. It is also recommended that there be a review of the definitions and criteria for other health impaired and physically impaired to ensure that they are distinct categories, and that the relationship of other health impaired to physically impaired and adapted physical education be clarified by the Minnesota Department of Education.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of other health impaired. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, and interviews. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; and team override decisions.

The information obtained during this study suggests that the adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for other health impaired may have had an impact on the student population being served, although the extent of that impact is unclear. An examination of Minnesota child count figures from the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicates that there has been an increase of more than 200% in the number of students identified under the category of other health impaired (from 640 to 1,964). This reflects an increase in the relative percentage of students with other health impairments from .077% to .205%. Examination of questionnaire data suggested that the vast majority (80.4%) of directors of special education who indicated their opinions believe that the number of new students entering the

Perceived Change in the Number of Students with Other Health Impairments



category of other health impaired has been increasing. Only 3.7% believed that there has been a decrease, while 15.9% thought the number of new students had remained stable. A likely factor accounting for a significant percentage of this increase is the United States Department of Education memorandum (1991) recognizing that children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may be considered disabled and eligible for special education services under the label of other health impaired.

For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated some concern with the current definition and entrance criteria for other health impaired. Comments from the directors of special education who participated in focus groups and representatives from disability organizations noted that the entrance criteria for other health impaired are so broad that they allow many students with minor educational problems to qualify when they do not qualify for services in other disability categories. This is because the -1.5 standard deviation achievement deficit is less than deficits required for many other disability categories. This may also account for part of the increase in the number and relative percentage of students being served in this category. Second, they indicated that there are many similarities between the categories of other health impaired and physically impaired, and that this factor has created a certain amount of confusion. Teachers of students with physical impairments echoed this concern during their focus group, adding that the role of developmental adapted physical education for students who have other health impairments is unclear.

Questionnaire data from the directors of special education suggest that team override decisions are used very infrequently for the category of other health impaired. Nearly three-fourths (73.8%) of the directors of special education indicated that team override decisions are never used, and 22.6% said that they are used in less than 2% of all cases.

Based on the information collected during this study, two recommendations are made. First, it is recommended that the criteria for other health impaired be reviewed to determine whether they are sufficiently restrictive to ensure that only students with other health impairments are eligible. Second, it is recommended that there be a review of the definitions and criteria for other health impaired and physically impaired to ensure that they are distinct categories, and that the relationship of other health impaired to physically impaired and adapted physical education be clarified by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Physically Impaired

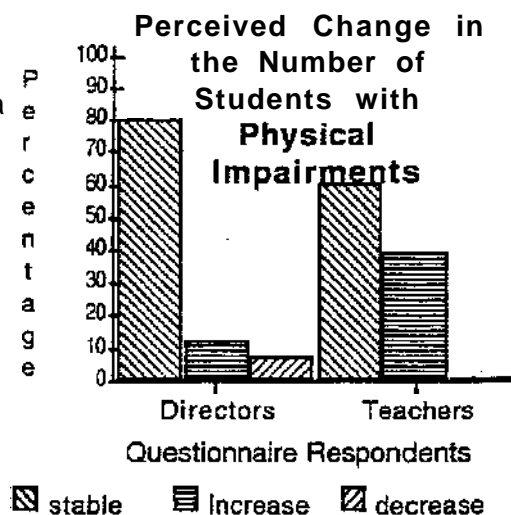
It appears that the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of physically impaired has had no impact on the student population being served.

For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria for physically impaired.

No changes in the current definition and criteria for the category physically impaired are recommended. However, because the relationship of physically impaired to other health impaired and adapted physical education was viewed as confusing, it is recommended that this relationship be clarified by the Minnesota Department of Education.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of physically impaired. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

Based on the information collected during this study, it appears that the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of physically impaired has had no impact on the student population being served. An examination of Minnesota child count figures from the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicates that there has been no significant change in the number of students with physical impairments (from 1,332 to 1,359), although there has been a slight decrease in the relative percentage of school age children served under the physically impaired label, from .160% to .142%. Overall, the special education directors who indicated an opinion tended to see the number of new students eligible for physical impairment services within their districts as remaining stable; 80.3% indicated no change. Teachers perceived the numbers as remaining the same (54.7%) or increasing (35.8%).



However, teacher comments suggested that the increases noted may have been the result of overall district growth.

Among those teachers who indicated an opinion, 95.1% indicated that students have not been exited from their programs because of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria. Only two teachers (4.9%) indicated that students had been exited as a result of these changes, and in one case this was due to student eligibility for other health impaired services. Rather, according to questionnaire data, students are exited from physical impairment programs for traditional reasons: because they leave the district, drop out of school, graduate, or reach the age of 21.

For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria for physically impaired. This satisfaction was noted by focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and representatives from disability organizations. It should be noted, however, that members of all three groups questioned the relationship of physically impaired to other health impaired and developmental adapted physical education, suggesting that the relationship was extremely confusing.

Examination of questionnaire data suggested that the vast majority of teachers of students with physical impairments (80.8%) have found no factors or conditions that have made the current criteria difficult to apply. Of those teachers who indicated an opinion, 88.1% also noted that students with physical impairments who are currently being identified have the same characteristics or traits as those students who were identified prior to adoption of the current criteria.

All teachers (100%) and nearly all directors of special education (98.8%) indicated that team override decisions are never, or infrequently, used for students with physical impairments. The explanation provided most frequently by teachers maintained that few students have needed placement based on team overrides (91.8%). Questionnaire data also indicated that there has been no increase in the frequency of team override decisions for the category of physically impaired since the adoption of the current definition and criteria. Support for these views was noted during the review of override documentation. A request for override documentation from randomly selected directors of special education failed to yield any team override decisions for the category of physically impaired.

Based upon the information obtained during this study, no changes in the current definition and criteria for the category of physically impaired are recommended. However, because the relationship of physically impaired to other health impaired and adapted physical education was viewed as confusing, it is recommended that this relationship be clarified by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Severely Multiply Impaired

The information obtained during this study suggested that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for severely multiply impaired has had no impact

There are no concerns about either the definition or criteria for this category; therefore, no recommendations are made.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of severely multiply impaired. This investigation addressed incidence rates and perceived parental satisfaction through a questionnaire of directors of special education and interviews with personnel from Minnesota disability organizations.

The information obtained during this study suggested that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for severely multiply impaired has had no impact. This seems to be a seldom used category with no corresponding teacher license. In addition, no official child count data have been kept for the years 1990-91 to 1993-94. This would suggest that students eligible for service under this label have been receiving service in other special education categories. Based upon this information, it appears that there are no concerns about either the definition or criteria for this category, and therefore, no recommendations are made.

Specific Learning Disability

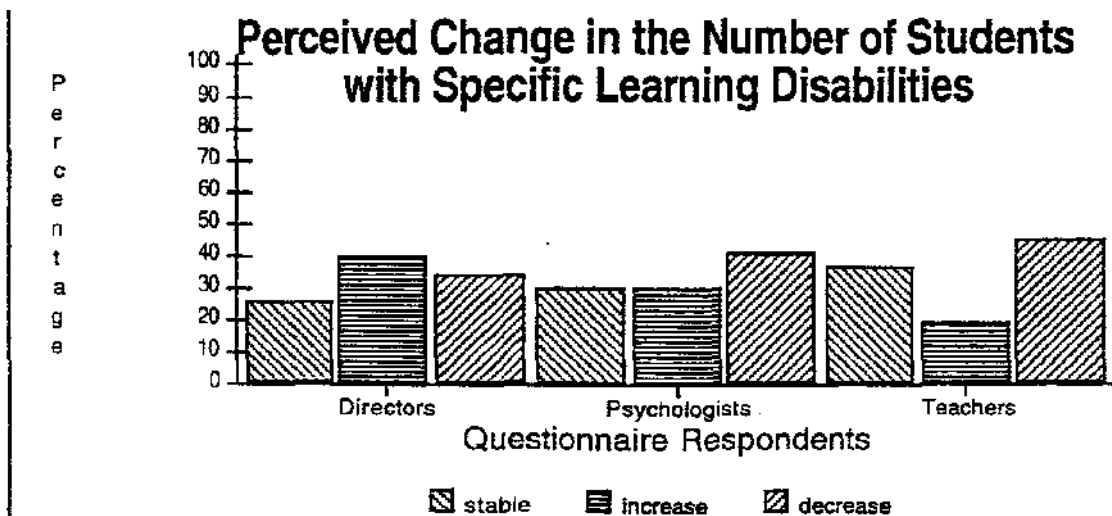
The adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for specific learning disability has had an impact on the student population being served. Fewer students are being identified exclusively on underachievement, and information processing is playing an increasing, albeit small, role.

For the most part, the adoption of a statewide definition and entrance criteria is viewed favorably. However, concerns and confusion do exist regarding some components of that definition and criteria, especially information processing.

It is recommended that there should be clarification of the construct of information processing, including the ways and means to best identify and measure it. Second, the recommendations made by the focus groups for specific learning disabilities should be implemented as appropriate.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of specific learning disabilities. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and entrance criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

The information obtained during this study suggests that the adoption of the current statewide definition and criteria for specific learning disabilities has had an impact on the student population being served. An examination of Minnesota child count figures for the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicates that the relative percentage of students receiving services for specific learning disabilities has



decreased by .252% (from 3.818% to 3.566%), although the number of students has increased by nearly 2,200. Questionnaire responses were mixed regarding the trend at the local level. Of those indicating an opinion, 36.7% of the teachers, 29.7% of school psychologists, and 25.9% of the directors saw the numbers as stable. While 18.9% of the teachers, 29.7% of the school psychologists, and 40.0% of the directors indicated they had seen increases in the number of students eligible for specific learning disabilities services, 44.4% of the teachers, 40.6% of the school psychologists, and 34.1 % of the directors indicated that the number was decreasing.

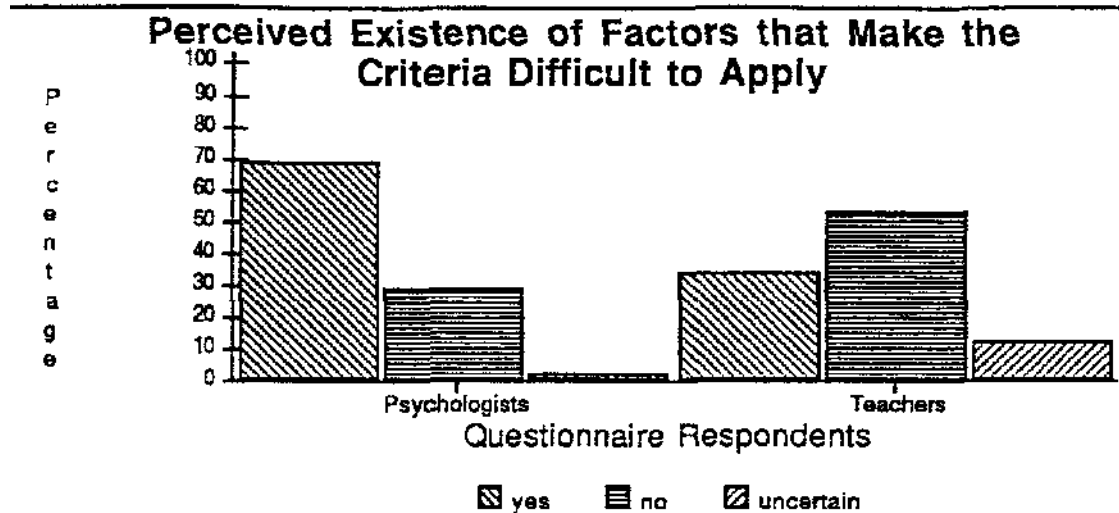
A majority (61.9%) of the teachers and school psychologists indicated that students with specific learning disabilities who are currently being identified have the same characteristics or traits as students who were identified prior to the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria. However, nearly one-third of the teachers (29.3%) and school psychologists (29.4%) noted differences. They indicated that fewer students were being identified based exclusively on underachievement, and a gradually increasing number were being identified based on information processing deficits. Participants from all groups in this study expressed the concern that many of the underachieving students who no longer qualify, or who would previously have qualified under local standards, are now in a "gray area" where they will likely receive little or no educational support, despite having educational needs.

While 68.7% of teachers and school psychologists responding to the questionnaire did not believe that students have been exited from services because of the adoption of the current definition and criteria for specific learning disabilities, and 15.1% expressed uncertainty, 16.2% did believe that this was the case. Comments from this latter group suggested that the reasons for those exits were that students did not meet the current entrance criteria in the areas of severe discrepancy or information processing, or that they had met their goals and objectives.

For the most part, practitioners, administrators, and disability organizations view favorably the adoption of a statewide definition and entrance criteria. However, concerns and confusion do exist regarding some components of that definition and criteria.

A considerable number of teachers (34.3%) and a majority of school psychologists (68.4%) indicated there were factors or conditions that made the current entrance criteria difficult to apply. The primary factor noted was confusion about information processing. Many practitioners indicated that they do not understand the concept behind information processing, how to identify it, or how to measure it. The requisite number of information processing deficits and the degree to which they must occur in order for a student to be eligible for specific learning disability services are also unclear. However, there were comments from some questionnaire respondents that suggested that they do

not view the information processing components as confusing and are able to use it successfully in the identification of students.



Likewise, focus group participants indicated confusion about information processing. They also expressed concerns about the mandated discrepancy cutoff and issues of assessment, especially in the areas of oral expression and listening comprehension. Other concerns addressed by the focus groups for specific learning disabilities involved the difficulty in determining the cultural, environmental, and economic factors associated with the exclusionary clause and the increase in "gray area" students. In addition, a fear exists that now that parents and practitioners are becoming reasonably familiar with the current definition and entrance criteria, significant changes are imminent. These concerns and their corresponding recommendations may be further reviewed by referring to the [Focus Group Summary Report](#).

Team override decisions are used infrequently in the category of specific learning disabilities; however, they appear to be used somewhat more often here than in other disability categories. Teachers and school psychologists indicated that they never (10.0%) or infrequently (86.2%) used team overrides, while most directors (83.3%) found that team overrides were used in fewer than 2% of the cases. Questionnaire information suggested two predominant reasons for this lack of use. First, few students have needed placement based on team override decisions (42.6%). Second, there are concerns about being monitored by the Minnesota Department of Education (27.4%).

Perceptions were mixed as to whether the use of team override decisions has changed since the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria in January 1992. While over one-half (54.1%) of all questionnaire respondents who indicated their opinions saw no change in the use of team override decisions, nearly one-third (33.1%) felt they were used less frequently. The remaining 12.8% observed an increase in their use.

A request for override documentation from 25 randomly selected special education directors yielded 40 files containing team override decisions for specific learning disabilities. A review of these files revealed that most of the overrides were written for students who did not demonstrate a -1.75 standard deviation achievement discrepancy. In many of these cases, the documentation supplied to support the presence of a disability was more subjective than objective. In other words, reference was made to information processing deficits, but no objective data was provided to support the existence of an information processing deficit. However, it should be noted that, by and large, the overrides examined were so poorly organized and written in such a convoluted way that even for professionals with extensive training and experience in assessment, it was very difficult to determine whether or not the criteria for team overrides had been met.

Based upon the information collected during this study, two recommendations are made. First, there should be clarification of the construct of information processing, including the ways and means to best identify and measure it. Second, the recommendations made by the focus groups for specific learning disabilities should be implemented.

Speech or Language Impairments

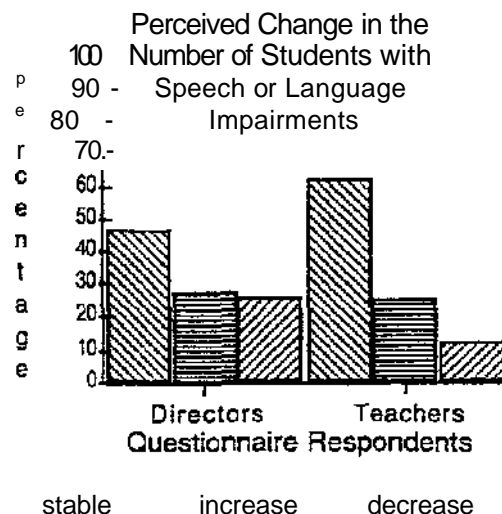
The adoption of the current definition and criteria for speech or language impairments may have had an impact on the student population being served. The students now being *served* appear to have more severe speech and language problems.

There is general satisfaction with much of the current definition and entrance criteria for speech or language impairments. However, three broad concerns were noted: the establishment of the -2.0 standard deviation discrepancy, identification of appropriate assessment instruments, and the transition from early childhood special education to speech or language services in elementary school.

Based on the information collected during this study, it is suggested that the recommendations made by the focus group for speech or language services should be implemented.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of speech or language impairments. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and representatives from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

The information obtained during this study suggests that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for speech or language impairments may have had an impact on the student population being served. Examination of Minnesota child count figures for the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 revealed an increase in the number of students receiving services (from 15,750 to 16,904), but a decrease in the relative percentage (1.885% to 1.763%) of the school age population. Questionnaire responses were mixed regarding the trend at the local level. Of those indicating their opinions, 46.3% of the teachers and 62.5% of the directors viewed the numbers as stable, while about one-fourth (27.6% and 25.0%, respectively) indicated that they had seen increases in the number of students eligible for speech language services.



Another one-fourth (26.1%) of the teachers and 12.5% of the directors indicated that numbers were decreasing.

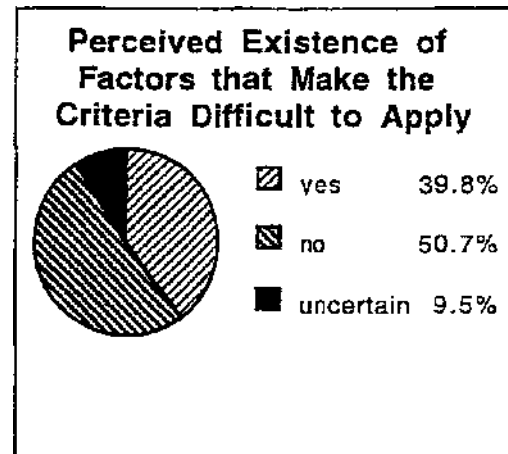
Over half of the teachers (55.9%) indicated that students with speech or language impairments who are currently being identified have the same characteristics or traits as students who were identified prior to adoption of the current criteria. Nearly one-third (31.9%) of the teachers had noted differences, and 12.2% were uncertain. Comments from most teachers, including those who indicated that they had not seen differences in student characteristics or traits, were similar. They suggested that because the current entrance criteria require impairment at the level of -2.0 standard deviations below the mean, those students with less severe impairments, who may have a greater potential for remediation, no longer qualify for services. Consequently, the students who do qualify have more severe problems, including language delays, academic problems, poor social skills, and pragmatic problems that include functional communication skills.

Of those teachers indicating their opinions, 94.6% suggested that students have not been exited from their programs because of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria. Only eleven teachers (5.4%) indicated that they had exited students for this reason. Rather, most students are exited from programs for speech or language impairments because they have met their goals and objectives. Among those teachers commenting on this issue, many suggested that they did not believe that adoption of the current criteria meant that students already on caseloads and who would no longer qualify for initial placement had to be exited. These teachers stated that students were only exited when they had achieved their goals and objectives.

For the most part, the information obtained from focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and personnel from disability organizations indicated general satisfaction with much of the current definition and entrance criteria for speech or language impairments. However, three broad concerns were noted: the establishment of the -2.0 standard deviation discrepancy, identification of appropriate assessment instruments, and the transition from early childhood special education to speech or language services in elementary school.

Focus group participants also noted some minor concerns with the definition and entrance criteria for speech or language impairment. These were: identifying voice disorders without a medical diagnosis, the omission of phonological processes from the definition of articulation disorders, the inclusion of nasal resonance in the criteria, and the use of the term "dialectical and cultural" in the exclusionary clause. These concerns and their respective recommendations may be viewed by referring to the [Focus Group Summary Report](#).

Examination of questionnaire data suggested that the majority of those teachers of students with speech or language impairments (50.6%) found no factors or conditions that made the current criteria difficult to apply. However, many teachers (39.8%) did note such factors and 9.5% were uncertain. The most frequently mentioned factors were the perceived lack of appropriate standardized assessment instruments, especially for younger students, and the need for student performance to be -2.0 standard deviations below the mean in articulation and language disorders. This was also an issue noted by focus group participants.



Team override decisions in the category of speech or language impairments appear to be rarely used. The vast majority of teachers (97.3%) indicated that they are never used or infrequently used. A slightly smaller percentage of the directors (92.9%) indicated that this was the case. The explanation provided by 48.8% of the teachers maintained that few students have needed placement based on team overrides. An additional 22.7% suggested that team overrides were used infrequently because of concerns about monitoring. Only twenty-six teachers (12.3%) who responded to the questionnaire indicated that team override decisions are used more frequently now than before the 1992 implementation of the current definition and entrance criteria.

A request for override documentation from 25 randomly selected special education directors yielded copies of 11 actual student files. An examination of these files revealed that a high percentage of team override decisions were made on behalf of early childhood special education students. The majority of these were implemented because even though formal assessment data did not reveal performance at or below -2.0 standard deviations below the mean, student intelligibility was severely limited. A related issue noted by focus group participants and questionnaire respondents was the difficulty experienced when students receiving early childhood special education services move to the elementary level. Many of these students do not qualify for speech or language services, although they are seen as having significant needs.

Based on the information collected during this study, it is suggested that the recommendations made by the focus group for speech or language services should be implemented.

Visually Impaired

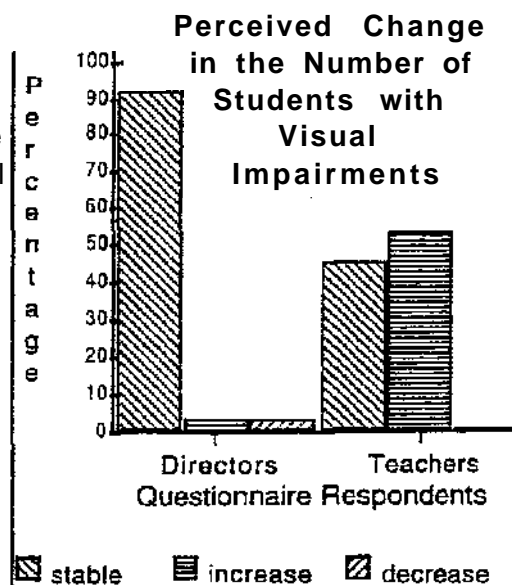
The information obtained during this study indicated that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for visually impaired appears to have had little impact on the student population being served.

For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria for visually impaired as they currently exist. However, some relatively minor concerns were noted.

Based on the information collected during this study, it is suggested that those recommendations made by the focus group for the category of visually impaired be implemented to increase the clarity and precision of the definition and criteria.

The following is a summary of the data collected during the 1993-94 academic year concerning the impact of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria for the category of visually impaired. This investigation probed various factors associated with the current definition and criteria through the use of focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, and a review of files. The factors included: perceived satisfaction on the part of practitioners, administrators, and personnel from Minnesota disability organizations; incidence rates; team override decisions; and students being exited from special education programs.

The information obtained during this study indicated that the adoption of the current definition and criteria for visually impaired appears to have had little impact on the student population being served. An examination of Minnesota child count figures from the years 1990-91 to 1993-94 indicates that there has been no significant change in the number of students with visual impairments (from 343 to 351), although there has been a slight decrease in their relative percentage (.041% to .037%). Overall, the special education directors who indicated their opinions tended to see the number of new students eligible for visual impairment services within their districts as remaining stable; 92.5% indicated no change. On a local level, however, teachers' perceptions were somewhat different. Whereas 46.2% of the teachers had seen no increase in the number of new students eligible for services since the adoption of the current definition and criteria, 53.8% had noted an increase. This perception of an increase in numbers can conceivably be attributed to

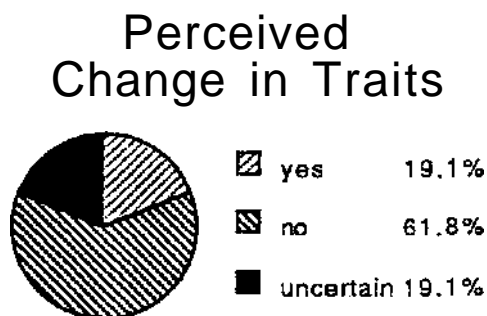


the fact that visual impairment is such a low incidence disability that teachers may view an increase of just one student as significant.

Of those teachers offering their opinions, 92.7% indicated that students have not been exited from their programs because of the adoption of the current definition and entrance criteria. Only three teachers (7.3%) indicated that students had been exited as a result of the current criteria, and in two cases this was due to a lack of educational need. Rather, students are exited from visual impairment programs because they graduate, reach the age of 21, leave the district, or their medical condition is corrected.

For the most part, the information obtained during this study indicated general satisfaction with the current definition and criteria for visually impaired as they currently exist. This satisfaction was noted by focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and disability organizations. However, some relatively minor concerns were noted by members of all three groups.

Examination of questionnaire data suggested that the majority of teachers of students with visual impairments (68.1%) have found no factors or conditions that have made the current criteria difficult to apply. However, some teachers (21.3%) did indicate some difficulty with application of the criteria. The most frequently noted problem (also mentioned by representatives of disability organizations) was the issue of infant eligibility, where the impact of vision on skills is more subjective. Representatives from disability organizations suggested that the medical component of the criteria be changed to ensure that it addresses only those infants with true visual impairments. In addition, 61.8% of the teachers suggested that students with visual impairments who are currently being identified have the same characteristics or traits as those students who were identified prior to adoption of the current criteria, while 19.1% were uncertain. Comments from teachers who had noted differences in traits and characteristics (19.1%) suggested that they were the result of establishing 20/60 acuity and the emphasis placed on nystagmus.



Similarly, focus group participants noted several relatively minor concerns. These included: inconsistency in terminology (pupil v. learner, visually disabled v. visually impaired); visual acuity in young children that may be less than 20/60; the use of nystagmus and albinism as examples of congenital or degenerating eye conditions; and variable visual acuity that is the direct result of certain eye conditions. These concerns and their respective

recommendations may be reviewed by referring to the Focus Group Summary Report.

All teachers (100%) and all directors of special education (100%) indicated that team override decisions are never, or infrequently, used for students with visual impairments. The explanation provided most often by teachers held that few students have needed placement based on team overrides (81.4%). The majority of teachers (94.1%) also indicated no increase in the frequency of team override decisions for the category of visually impaired since the adoption of the current definition and criteria. Support for these views was noted during the review of override documentation. A request for override documentation from 25 randomly selected directors of special education failed to yield any team override decisions for the category of visually impaired.

Based on the information collected during this study, it is suggested that those recommendations made by the focus group for the category of visually impaired be implemented to increase the clarity and precision of the definition and criteria.

Other Criteria-Related Issues

The following information, while not specifically dealing with the current definitions and criteria for special education, did arise directly out of the various components of this study. This information came from the myriad comments made by focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and representatives of disability organizations, and because of the importance placed upon it by those who mentioned it, it is viewed as being essential to this report.

Assessment

Several assessment issues were mentioned not only by focus group participants, but also in the comments made by questionnaire respondents and representatives of disability organizations. These issues involve both formal and informal assessment, and fall into three general classes.

Formal Versus Informal Data: Many individuals believe that the Minnesota Department of Education places so much emphasis on formal assessment data (statistical information and significant discrepancies) that informal assessment information is used sparingly. Consequently, some teachers and school psychologists view information collected informally as having a subordinate position to formal data, and they seem to believe that it should be used only as support for formal data, not as refutation of such data. In addition, there is a feeling that in a monitoring situation, informal assessment information will be viewed as inadequate.

Differential Application of Criteria: It appears that there may be differential application of many entrance criteria, which is based on the teachers' perceptions of their ability to accurately assess each criterion. Criteria with established cutoff points that readily lend themselves to formal assessment with commercially available tools are generally perceived as being of greater significance when making placement decisions. On the other hand, many teachers experience difficulty in identifying pertinent assessment information for criteria that are abstract or based on hypothetical constructs because they are not as easily assessed. Because the assessment of characteristics linked to abstract criteria is more difficult, teachers feel uncomfortable with the process and prefer to use familiar and established methods of assessment. Examples include an over-reliance on the -1.75 discrepancy cutoff for specific learning disabilities because assessment of information processing is viewed by many practitioners as confusing; and greater ease of application of the 70-IQ cutoff than of the adaptive behavior component for mentally impaired.

Assessment Tools: Many teachers expressed concern about a lack of formal and informal assessment tools that closely correlate with some sections of the

various disability criteria. Because of the previously noted overreliance on hard data, practitioners do not feel qualified to tease out the necessary information and apply it when making placement decisions. For example, within the adaptive behavior component of the mental impairment criteria, there are no nationally normed instruments that specifically address each of the four domains. Rather, the existing commercially available assessment tools for measuring adaptive behavior have identified and labeled components of adaptive behavior differently. Teachers also expressed concern about identifying specific instruments for the assessment of specific learning disabilities in oral expression and listening comprehension. Another example was noted by teachers of students with speech or language impairments. They questioned the appropriateness of relying on articulation instruments that isolate sounds when overall intelligibility may be the greater concern.

Cultural, Environmental, and Economic Influences

A number of concerns were expressed about the influence of cultural, environmental, and economic influences in the assessment process and how they may contribute to overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Both teachers and school psychologists indicated that they do not always feel comfortable in judging the degree of influence that these factors may have on data collected during assessments. As a result, they fear that they will discriminate in some way against children, either by perceiving a cultural characteristic as an area of deficit or by overlooking a child with specific needs because he or she is a member of a minority group. Common examples include expressive language issues with Native American students and delayed demonstration of some personal functioning skills among Hispanic children. Paired with this concern is the awareness that some degree of cultural bias is inherent in all formal assessment instruments.

Exit Criteria

There is some confusion about the criteria to be used when exiting previously qualified students from special education programs. Two perceptions exist. Some practitioners believe that the current entrance criteria should also be used as exit criteria. For example, if, at the time of the three-year reassessment, students no longer meet the entrance criteria, they should be exited even if they have not demonstrated the ability to succeed without special education services. Others insist that students should only be exited based upon the criteria contained in subpart 3525.1349, exit procedures. In other words, they must meet their goals and objectives and demonstrate the ability to succeed without special education services.

Gray Area Students

Concerns expressed by many focus group participants, disability organization representatives, and questionnaire respondents addressed two groups of "gray area" students. First are those students who previously may have met local criteria for special education services but do not meet current statewide

standards. The creation of this group is primarily the result of more restrictive criteria for specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, and mental impairments. Second, because of inconsistencies between early childhood special education criteria and K-12 special education criteria, students who receive early childhood services may not qualify for K-12 special education services when they enter elementary school.

Lack of Service Options: Concerns were expressed about students who are not eligible for special education services but who are perceived as being in need of assistance in order to succeed in general education classes. Comments suggested that many regular education teachers and administrators are not trained to adequately adapt curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of these students.

According to questionnaire data, service options for "gray area" students seem to be quite limited in most school districts. Chapter I (remedial reading and remedial mathematics) services, by far the most common option available, are often limited to the elementary school level, leaving many older students unserved. While many of the students appear to qualify for intervention plans under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Public Law 93-112), comments indicated that these are often of minimal quality, it appears that personnel from some school districts acknowledge that students who do not qualify for special education may have some educational needs. However, little seems to be done beyond that acknowledgment to directly address those needs, either because of lack of knowledge or other factors at the local level. On the other hand, some respondents noted that their districts have begun to provide new options for those students who are ineligible for special education but have significant educational needs. These options go beyond Chapter I services and Section 504 plans, to include assurance of mastery, organized peer tutoring, resource study halls, and supervised after-school study sessions.

Transition: According to special education teachers who work with early elementary-age students, the transition from early childhood services to K-12 special education appears to be problematic. This was mentioned by teachers of students with mental impairments, specific learning disabilities, and speech or language impairments. There are concerns that students who receive intervention through early childhood special education programs often make significant gains, and ultimately are able to function at much higher levels than if they had not received services. However, those gains frequently prevent them from qualifying for special education at the elementary level. For example, students who have received intervention that helps them to improve adaptive functioning may not qualify for mental impairment services because their performance exceeds the adaptive functioning criteria in one or more of the four domains. When they no longer receive direct intervention at the elementary level they begin to regress, but often a year or more passes before they qualify for K-12 special education. Practitioners believe that many students who

qualified for early childhood special education should be allowed to qualify for special education at the elementary level, rather than being penalized for the gains they have made, and will surely lose if they are denied continued service. Other problems that appear to have an impact on the transition from early childhood special education to K-12 special education include the lack of specific labels at the early childhood level, and funding issues based on age.

Other Agents

Although a majority of participants in the study appeared to be generally satisfied with the statewide definitions and criteria, a number of teachers, school psychologists, and representatives of special education organizations commented that, in certain situations, implementation of such criteria is adversely affected by other agents. These agents were identified as Minnesota Department of Education staff and monitors; and school district administrators.

Minnesota Department of Education Inconsistencies: Practitioners have often found it difficult to obtain information from the Minnesota Department of Education. Many instances of multiple, contradictory answers provided by the same staff member, as well as different answers from different staff members, were cited. These problems have created delays at the local level, and ultimately they have had a negative impact on service delivery.

In addition, the process of monitoring was viewed negatively by many participants of this study. Numerous comments indicated that special education paperwork is generated in an attempt to second guess monitoring requirements, rather than to provide working documents to assist teachers and parents of students. Instead of being viewed as professionals making constructive suggestions to improve the overall quality of paperwork, monitors are simply perceived as adversarial and inconsistent.

School District Administrators' Influence on Decisions: Several concerns were expressed about the impact of district administrators on child study team decisions. These concerns addressed situations in which administrators influenced the placement of certain students, including students who were not qualified for special education. Also noted were situations in which administrators implied that there were limits to the number of students who could be served because of already large caseloads and the lack of funds necessary to hire additional staff. Comments suggested that in each situation administrative pressure had an influence on the orderly process of determining eligibility for the student.

Team Override Decisions

Information gathered during this study yielded several findings about the use of the team override on eligibility decisions. First, team overrides appear to be used very infrequently. Second, there appears to be a general lack of

understanding regarding the requirements for a team override. Consequently, concerns exist about the implementation of team override decisions.

Practitioners and directors of special education seem to believe that *very few* team override decisions are needed because most students are either clearly eligible or ineligible for special education services. However, in those cases where eligibility is in question, practitioners often have concerns about the implementation of the team override process.

Comments from questionnaire respondents and representatives of disability organizations suggested that many teachers do not understand how and when to implement the override process. First, they do not seem to know how to explain the lack of validity in standard assessment procedures, how to use other information to document the presence of a disability, or how to determine which data are the most important in making an eligibility decision. Second, there are concerns that if a team override decision is made it will be questioned and overturned by state monitors.

A review of team override documentation provided by 25 randomly selected directors of special education confirmed these concerns. Approximately one-fourth of the overrides examined during this study were clearly and concisely written, well organized, and provided adequate support to justify the decision, in other words, they explained why the standards and procedures used resulted in invalid findings; they indicated the objective data used to determine the presence of a disability; they explained which data had the greatest relative importance; and they included a team sign-off sheet.

One-fourth of the samples examined, however, appeared to be unnecessary. In other words, based on the data included in the assessment team summary reports, the students appeared to meet the criteria for the disability area in question. While this finding was somewhat curious, it confirmed the lack of understanding of the override process as a whole. This lack of understanding was also substantiated by comments made by a representative of one of the disability organizations interviewed. She indicated that in her position as a parent advocate she has been involved in override decisions that were made to shorten a student's school day, to shorten the school year, and to ensure an extended school year for other students. These clearly are not subjects that team override decisions are intended to address.

The remaining one-half of the samples were poorly organized and written in a convoluted way. Even for professionals with extensive training and experience in assessment, it was very difficult to determine what part of the criteria was being overridden, and whether or not the criteria for team override had been met.

Further examination of override documentation revealed that the current recommended form for the assessment summary may create a certain amount of confusion. For example, in a number of cases where this form was used, both the box "Does meet standard criteria" and the box "Is eligible by variance from the standard criteria" were checked; or the box "is in need of special education services" was checked along with the box that indicated eligibility for variance. It appears that fewer problems might occur if this form were clarified or amended to address each of the criteria in 3525.1347.

In addition, there does not appear to be a correlation between the entrance criteria and the assessment results required in the present level of performance section of the state-recommended assessment summary. Rather, the assessment summaries reviewed in this study were laden with numbers, statistics, and excessive verbiage that did not adequately describe the problems the students were experiencing. As a result, many assessment summaries did not contain the data needed to support a team override decision. Instead, the decisions appeared to be based on "gut reactions" that students need services. This problem may be inherent in having state forms, or it may suggest a greater problem: that while many teachers are skilled at assisting students, they do not have the background necessary to administer and skillfully interpret assessment information.

Most comments made by teachers and directors of special education recognized that many of their questions and concerns about successfully implementing team override decisions arise out of previous negative monitoring experiences. Others are the result of difficulty in assessing and documenting performance deficits associated with certain areas of the criteria. As a result, many directors are hesitant to encourage child study teams to exercise the team override option, even in cases where it may be appropriate.

Utility of the Study

Several concerns about the ultimate impact of this study were repeatedly voiced by focus group participants, questionnaire respondents, and representatives of disability organizations. First, some questioned whether the data collected will in fact result in improvements in the special education process, or whether wholesale changes will be made simply for the sake of change.

Representatives of disability organizations were especially concerned that massive changes may occur without careful evaluation of the possible impact of those changes. The general sentiment expressed held that the current definitions and criteria have not been in place long enough to permit an adequate evaluation of their impact.

Second, participants hoped that this study will be only the beginning of an extended process that will ultimately result in improvements to the current definitions and entrance criteria, as well as to the special education process as a whole. They were concerned, however, that changes would be made at the

state level without the further direct involvement of experts and practitioners. Such involvement would help to ensure that definitions and entrance criteria become more effective in the identification of special education students.

Paperwork

Paperwork was regarded as an overwhelming concern. Teachers and disability organizations view the time required to complete paperwork as being excessive and as the cause of a significant reduction in the time available to work with students. The behavior-intervention plan was an example of excess paperwork; it was mentioned not only by questionnaire respondents, but by disability organization representatives as well.

It seems, however, that at least some of the paperwork in question is not required by the Minnesota Department of Education, but, instead, is mandated at the local level. It appears that because district administrators often view the monitoring practices of the Minnesota Department of Education as threatening, they introduce additional paperwork to ensure that "all their bases are covered."

A related issue noted by focus group participants and questionnaire respondents was caseload size. Teachers are concerned that their ability to appropriately serve students is often impaired because increased caseloads also mean increased paperwork.

Service Delivery

A predominant concern, noted during all interviews with representatives of disability organizations, was dissatisfaction with service delivery. This concern was echoed in the comments made by focus group participants and questionnaire respondents. A variety of topics were mentioned, from inclusion to specific programming issues. The service delivery issues discussed below are only examples and are by no means exhaustive. They do not address all of the concerns noted by representatives of disability organizations, nor all of the concerns mentioned by focus group participants and questionnaire respondents who participated in this study.

Many comments suggested a growing concern about the narrowing of the continuum of services. A common sentiment held that the philosophy of full inclusion seems to be of greater importance than the needs of the special education students affected by inclusion. While the trend toward full inclusion may be appropriate for some students who were previously served in self-contained or resource-room programs, other students appear to be suffering because their needs are not being met in the regular classroom. For example, some students have disabilities so severe that while they do benefit from a certain amount of social integration, they also need extensive individualized service or training that is not practical in, or appropriate to, a regular classroom setting. These may include students with severe multiple impairments or with severe mental retardation.

Also receiving questionable benefit from full inclusion are students who are so easily distracted that their rate of learning seems to decrease proportionately as the number of students in the classroom increases. Students with severe specific learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, or other health impairments may demonstrate a high degree of attendant distractibility.

Those who commented on service-delivery issues for students receiving speech or language services noted that many speech and language impairments are easier to remediate in small groups or individually, because articulation errors and language deficits noted in conversation are more readily isolated and corrected in more intimate settings. Working with larger groups of students within the regular classroom often delays progress.

Those individuals commenting on the criteria for hearing impaired noted several concerns related to service delivery. These ranged from poorly qualified interpreters to the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students who have been placed in regular classrooms with minimal support. Many of the comments made by representatives of disability organizations suggested that while full inclusion may be appropriate for some deaf students, many deaf students function more successfully when taught in settings that also include their deaf peers. Language development, proficiency in American Sign Language and other language systems, and exposure to deaf culture were given as reasons for grouping deaf students together rather than separating them.

Individuals from those groups representing children with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Tourette syndrome, and other neuro-biological disorders also expressed concerns about service delivery. Again, while some of these students function quite well in many educational settings with minimal special education support, a significant percentage have unique needs that are not being adequately met. In addition, while many of these students qualify for services under the definition and entrance criteria for other health impaired, many of them are ultimately served by teachers for emotional or behavioral disorders. Few of these teachers possess the background and experience to successfully work with students who have neuro-biological disorders. They tend to use behavior-modification techniques that may be successful with students who have behavioral disorders, rather than using more appropriate alternative methods for reducing or coping with behavioral manifestations that may arise out of the neuro-biological disorders.

There are also reports of service delivery problems directly associated with the category of emotional or behavioral disorders. Practitioners and members of disability organizations noted that placing certain students together often has detrimental effects. For example, some students with emotional disorders are often passive and withdrawn. Placing them with aggressive, acting-out students puts them in a vulnerable position. Not only is there some risk of physical harm,

there is a greater risk of intimidation prompting the likelihood of magnified or additional emotional problems.

Representatives of organizations representing individuals who are blind or have visual impairments noted two concerns regarding the teaching of braille. First, they believe that students should be taught braille writing using a stylus and slate before learning to use a computer. This sequence is similar to the way in which sighted students are taught to write and increases the likelihood of proficiency with the method. In addition, it is felt that individuals with progressive and generative diseases, such as retinitis pigmentosa, should learn braille at an early age, rather than waiting for a total loss of vision. The importance of early mobility training using a cane was also stressed.

Again, it should be stressed that the concerns about service delivery noted above are in no way meant to be an inclusive listing of all concerns that exist.

Recommendations

Based on the concerns voiced during this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Encourage the development of a range of service options within general education to meet the needs of all students who do not qualify for special education but who have educational needs.
2. Clarify the appropriate use and implementation of team override decisions.
3. Provide clarification as to whether the entrance criteria for the various disability areas may also be used as exit criteria.
4. Continue disseminating information about the impact that environmental, cultural, and economic influences can have on assessment results.
5. Continue to clarify and disseminate information about assessment, including selection and development of appropriate formal and informal instruments.
6. Because the issues of paperwork and caseloads are being addressed by the Special Education Task Force and the Legislature, no recommendation is necessary.

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